



CALVIN THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

3233 Burton SE • Grand Rapids, Michigan • 49546-4301

800 388-6034 fax: 616 957-8621 info@calvinseminary.edu

www.calvinseminary.edu

February 3, 2010

State Representative Mary Valentine
Chair- Families and Childrens Services Committee
north 1195 House Office Building
Box 30014
Lansing, Michigan 48909

Dear Representative Valentine and members of the Families and Child Services Committee,

For the past 11 years I have been the professor of Pastoral Care at Calvin Seminary in Grand Rapids. For twenty five years now I have also been involved in various ministries to adoptees, birth parents, and adoptive families. I worked for 15 year as a pastoral psychotherapist, specializing in issues of relinquishment and adoption and wrote a book about it!

I am writing to you in support of House Bills #4006/#4015 that have to do with open access to records of birth. Thankfully, this legislation hears the voices of many adoptees and birth parents who have for many years been kept from each other by law, a legal boundary that has proved to be both *unwise* and *unfair*. Not having access to one's birth parents and birth story makes adoptive development a more difficult challenge. Not knowing the story of one's relinquished child makes for life long difficulties for many birth mothers in the state of Michigan. And, also, not having access to one's history and story is simply unjust.

All three parties in the adoptive triad will benefit from the passage of these bills. Adoptees will grow up calmer and healthier. Birth parents will be more able to successfully grieve and be more at peace with their decisions to relinquish their children. And adoptive parents will have more to offer their children in terms of helping them grow up well. Let me explain.

The first reason has to do with what is needed for *healthy adoptive development*. Open access to records is essential for adoptees to know their own stories so that their identities may be completed. Serving as a pastoral psychotherapist at a counseling center in Denver, I worked with many relinquished and adopted adults. Without knowledge of birth parents, of ancestral heritage, of medical history, adoptees are at significant disadvantage in terms of their emotional development and physical well being. Especially in adolescence, relinquished and adopted persons sometimes have great difficulty "putting themselves together" because of these missing pieces of their stories. The problems are usually *not* about adoption, that is, the connections to

adoptive parents. The problems are with *relinquishment*, that is, with the grief, with the identity struggles, and with issues of intimacy that are set in motion in relinquishment. Minimizing this difficulty is a moral imperative which House Bills # 4006/4015 are thankfully written to correct. Development may be compromised and close attachments to others may be at risk when adoptees are denied access to their histories. They are at a significant disadvantage in terms of growing up well.

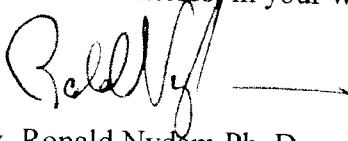
Second, simply put, *relinquished and adopted persons have a civil and a human right to know the truth about themselves*. This is not only about pain in development, it is also about fairness before the law of the land. It is unjust to deny adoptees what they, like every other citizen, have a *right* to have, namely their own birth histories, their ancestral trails, their stories of beginning as well as their medical records. With over 4000 genetically related disorders now identified, it is unethical to deny adoptees medical history which could save their lives. So, from the standpoint of justice, I believe that the current denial of access is morally wrong.

I understand the wish of some birth parents for privacy, if not confidentiality. However, please consider this from another viewpoint. Bringing a child into the world is a great and wonderful responsibility. It includes giving a child both history and care, even in the choice to relinquish. However, for both developmental and moral reasons, no one ought ever leave an egg or sperm or a born child without a name and address and phone number so that *the child* has the best chance possible to grow up healthy and well. *Advocacy for the unheard voice of the child must take primacy over the needs of adults who participate in the choices that create pregnancy*. It was shame-based decision making that drove the wish for a secret which most often proves unhealthy for birth parents. (Note that in some unfortunate self punishing way, one third of birth mothers never have another child.)

In considering this legislation please be clear *from a legal standpoint* that there was never a contractual agreement to confidentiality to the birth parents. "A promise is a promise" but no promise was ever legally made to the birth parents; they did the promising. Although birth parents may have been told that no one would ever know their stories by a kind and caring nurse or social worker, the documents that were signed years ago were legally "one way ratchets" whereby birth mothers/parents gave up an infant/child in exchange for *their* promising not to interfere or seek the child in any way, once relinquishment occurred. **Accordingly, open access to birth records breaks no legal arrangement.** [see the work of Elizabeth Samuels]

It is morally imperative that adoptees know their stories. *Thank you for considering their unheard voice in this new legislation.*

With sincere interest in your work,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ronald Nydam", followed by a horizontal line.

Rev. Ronald Nydam Ph. D.
Professor of Pastoral Care
Calvin Theological Seminary